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Cabinet Officials Announce Renewable Energy Initiative

*Promote use of woody biomass from
restoration and hazardous fuels treatment projects*

MISSOULA, Mont. - Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton announced today an initiative to encourage the use of woody biomass byproducts as sources of renewable energy. The officials signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that establishes consistent policies and procedures across the three agencies to support the use of these byproducts.

"The fuels treatment component of President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative and 10-year National Fire Plan offers an opportunity to convert the renewable biomass wood waste from this work into energy and other usable products," said Agriculture Secretary Veneman. "This initiative emphasizes our commitment to restore forest health in a way that provides ecological benefits."

The MOU promotes the use of woody biomass byproducts that result from forest, woodland, and rangeland restoration and hazardous fuels treatment projects, consistent with locally developed land management plans. The byproducts that are removed can be used for biomass energy, such as steam and electric and a variety of other uses.

"The Department of Energy is pleased to sign this Memorandum of Understanding with the Departments of Agriculture and Interior to set forth policy principles that have the potential to increase woody biomass utilization from federal lands for biomass energy and other bio-products," said Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham. "This cooperative effort with these major federal land-holding departments provides benefits in terms of reducing hazardous fuels and improving forest health while, at the same time, increasing the Nation's renewable energy supply. This memorandum reinforces our commitment and

support to the National Energy Policy's charge to re-evaluate access limitations to federal lands in order to increase renewable energy production."

The agreement focuses on the use of byproducts from land management practices, such as fuels treatment and hazardous fuels reduction that reduce the rate of spread, intensity, resistance to control and crowning potential of wildfires by reducing available fuel. Woody biomass includes trees and woody plants, including limbs, tops, needles, and other woody parts that grow in a forest, woodland, or rangeland area, that are byproducts of ecological restoration and hazardous fuel reduction treatment activities.

Energy is a key market for low-value woody biomass, and DOE, USDA and DOI support and conduct research into biomass energy alternatives.

"The challenge has been that markets for biomass and small wood are sporadic and marginally economical in most western states. Stewardship contracting for the next 10 years presents the opportunity for a steady supply, new markets and product uses," Interior Secretary Norton said. "Thinning for biomass allows for wildlife habitat improvement with wildlife biologists designing the projects. These projects go on all the time on private land and are profitable both for the environment, energy and the landowner. A million acres have been thinned in the last 25 years for biomass use and 800,000 of those acres were private."

The principles of this agreement will be implemented under the relevant authorities of the three federal departments. Under the MOU agencies agreed to:

" Promote understanding among local communities, interested parties and the general public in forest restoration and fuels treatment projects, biomass quality and quantity and seek input on woody biomass utilization strategies.

" Develop and apply the best scientific knowledge pertaining to woody biomass utilization and forest management practices for reducing hazardous fuels and improving forest health.

" Encourage the sustainable development and stabilization of woody biomass utilization markets.

" Support Indian Tribes as appropriate, in the development and establishment of woody biomass utilization within tribal communities as a means of creating jobs, establishing infrastructure and supporting new economic opportunities.

" Explore opportunities to provide a reliable, sustainable supply of woody biomass. Develop and apply meaningful measures of successful outcomes in woody biomass utilization.

President Bush announced the Healthy Forests Initiative in August of 2002, directing federal agencies to help reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire to America's forests and rangelands. The initiative builds on a historic 10-year plan for reducing wildfire risks adopted in the spring of 2002 by federal agencies in cooperation with western and southern governors, county commissioners, state foresters and tribal officials.

The MOU continues the Administration's efforts to advance opportunities for the commercialization of biomass energy. USDA and DOE are also working together to fund projects through the Biomass Research and Development program and the Renewable Energy Systems and Energy Efficiency Improvements program. Both programs were created by the Food Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002. Details on these programs can be found at <http://www.usda.gov/farbill/> and <http://www.bioproducts-bioenergy.gov/>.

The MOU becomes effectively immediately.